



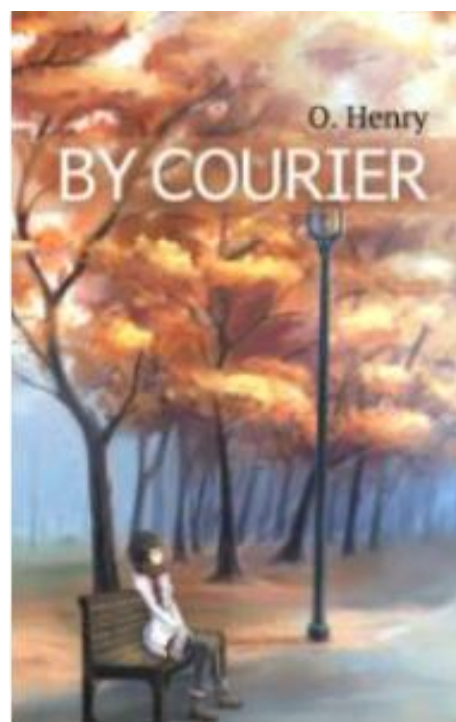
Learn English Through Stories

B1 Novels and Stories

Pre-Intermediate Level

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<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>



By Courier

By O Henry

At this time of year, and this time of day, there were very few people in the park. It was probable that the young lady, who was sitting on one of the benches, had just wanted to rest for a while and think about the coming spring.

She sat there, thoughtful and still. The sadness in her eyes seemed to be something new, because it had not yet changed her bright young face, nor turned her soft lips into a thin hard line.

A tall young man came walking through the park along the path near the bench where she was sitting. Behind him came a boy carrying a suitcase. When the man saw the young lady, his face changed to red and back to pale again. He watched her face as he came closer, and his own face showed both hope and worry at the same time.

He passed her only a few meters away, but she gave no sign that she had seen him, or even knew he was there.

Fifty meters further on the young man suddenly stopped and sat down on a bench by the path. The boy dropped the suitcase and stared at him with wondering eyes. The young man took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. It was a good handkerchief, a good face, and the young man was good to look at. He said to the boy:

'I want you to take a message to that young lady on that bench. Tell her I am on my way to the station, to leave for San Francisco. From there I shall travel north to the wild places of Alaska. Tell her that, as she has ordered me neither to speak nor to write to her, I am taking this chance to appeal to her one last time. Tell her that she has been unkind and unjust to someone who has done no wrong; and she has given him no reasons and no explanations. Tell her that I do not believe her to be an unjust person. Tell her that I have disobeyed her orders, in the hope that she will return to the paths of justice and reason. Go, and tell her that.'

The young man dropped a half-dollar into the boy's hand. The boy looked at him for a moment with bright, intelligent eyes out of a dirty face, then turned and ran down the path. As he came closer to the lady on the bench, he studied her carefully. The lady looked back at him coolly.

'Lady,' the boy said, 'that guy on the other bench sent yer a song and dance by me. If yer don't know the guy, and he's tryin' to do some funny business, say the word, and I'll call a cop in three minutes. If yer does know him, and he's all right, then I'll give yer the song and dance that he gave me.'

The young lady showed a little, just a little interest.

'A song and dance!' she said, in a very sweet voice that seemed to suggest something not at all sweet. 'A new idea - a kind of traveling singer, I suppose. I used to know the gentleman who sent you, so it will not be necessary to call the police. Please begin your song and dance, but do not sing too loudly. It is not really the time or the place for that kind of thing.'

'Aw, come on, lady,' said the boy, 'yer know what I mean. It ain't a song and dance really, it's a lot of hot air. He told me to tell you he's got his shirts in that case and he's movin' on to 'Frisco. Then he's goin' on up to Alaska. He says yer told him not to send round no more love notes, nor stand around lookin' over the garden gate. He says yer threw him out like last year's hat, and never gave him no chance to argue. He says yer told him to go, and never said why.'

The interest in the young lady's eyes did not go away. Perhaps her interest was in the cleverness of the future Alaskan traveller, who had found a way to get round her orders. She fixed her eyes on an untidy-looking tree in the park, and spoke to the messenger:

'Tell the gentleman that he knows very well what my ideals are. He knows what they have been, and he knows what they still are. In this matter, the two most important ideals are that a person should be true, and loyal. Tell him that I have studied my own heart, and I know that it can be weak, as well as strong. That is why I do not wish to listen to his arguments or to hear any words from him at all. I am not unjust, and have never been unjust. But if he really wants to hear what he already knows, you may tell him this...

'Tell him I entered the garden room that evening from the door at the back, to cut a flower for my mother. Tell him I saw him and Miss Ashburton beneath the pink oleander bush. It was a pretty picture indeed, but the juxtaposition told the whole story without the need for a single word. I left the garden room at once, without the flower, and with my ideals broken into a hundred thousand pieces. You may take that song and dance to your dancing teacher.'

'Juxta... juxta? Help me out, lady,' said the boy. 'Give me an easier word, will yer?'

'Juxtaposition... or, if you like, closeness - the kind of closeness that can destroy an ideal in a second.'

At once the boy turned and ran back to the other bench. The young man's eyes questioned him, hungrily. The boy's eyes shone with excitement at his new job as translator.

'The lady says that she knows that girls just can't stop listenin' when a guy comes tellin' stories and tryin' to be real nice and friendly. That's why she won't listen to no sweet words from yer. She says she caught yer in the hothouse under the flowers with yer arms around a girl. She just stepped in the back to get a flower for her ma, and yer was holdin' this other girl real nice and close. She says it looked pretty, all right all right, but the juxta... but it made her sick. She says yer gotta get busy and get off and get that train real quick.'

The young man's eyes opened wide and his eyes lit up with a sudden thought. His hand flew to the inside pocket of his coat, and pulled out a handful of letters. Choosing one, he gave it to the boy, together with a silver dollar from another pocket.

'Give that letter to the lady,' he said, 'and ask her to read it. Tell her that it should explain everything. Tell her that she needs another ideal - she must learn to trust, and that trust can prevent much unnecessary heartache. Tell her that her ideals are not broken. Tell her that the true and loyal person is still true and loyal, and has not changed in any way. Tell her I am waiting for an answer.'

The messenger stood before the lady again.

'The guy says there's been bad things said about him, and it ain't right, it ain't just. He says he ain't a bad guy. And, lady, yer read that letter, and you're goin' to see that he's all right, all right.'

The young lady took the letter. She seemed unsure about it, but she opened it, and read it.

Dear Dr Arnold

I want to thank you for the very kind help that you gave to my daughter last Friday evening, when she became suddenly ill with her old heart trouble in the garden room at Mrs Waldron's party. It was so lucky that you were near enough to catch her as she fell, and were able to give her a doctor's care at once. We are sure that you saved her life. I would be happy if you would visit us soon as her doctor.

Gratefully yours,

Robert Ashburton

The young lady closed the letter, and gave it back to the boy.

'The guy wants an answer,' said the messenger. 'What's the word, lady?'

The lady's eyes were suddenly very bright and smiling.

'Tell that guy on the other bench,' she said, with a happy, shaky little laugh, 'that his girl wants him.'

- THE END -